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SUBJECT: IMEDI BACK ON THE AIR, MICHNIK AND MONITORS IN PLACE

¶1. (SBU) Summary. After 34 days off the air due to a governmental shutdown, Imedi, Georgia's most popular television network, resumed full broadcasting on the evening of December 12, 2007. While some technical difficulties remain, Imedi is broadcasting nationally and by satellite to London and Moscow. Their first evening of programming kicked off with an hour-long, emotional, and somewhat provocative recounting of the events of November 7, 2007, when the station was raided by Interior Ministry forces and shut down. Imedi does not appear to have changed its largely anti-government editorial policy, and Giorgi Targamadze, their politicized anchor and chief editor, remains in control of the station's editorial policy. On December 13, Polish journalist and politician, Adam Michnik, returned to Tbilisi and held a press conference to announce he was beginning his work as a media ombudsman and to introduce the members of his media advisory group which will monitor news broadcasts of five television stations and all of the major newspapers. End Summary.

IMEDI IS BACK AND HITS BACK

¶2. (U) Imedi resumed its broadcast with the 8 p.m., one-hour Kronika news program with emotional video footage of the November 7 events against a jarring audio backdrop of the song "Everything Is Going to Be Fine," interspersing images of the police crackdown on protesters with the smiling faces of children playing at the Imedi premises. Kronika started off with Imedi replaying footage of its last minutes on air on November 7, featuring a drawn Targamadze announcing the police raid and going off the air. After a brief pause, Targamadze appeared live in the Kronika studio, saying: "Imedi is back on Georgian television. The uninvited guests have left the studio. We hope to be the last journalists to be forced out of a TV studio at gun point." Imedi reporters and cameramen recounted physical abuse they were subjected to by the police on November 7. According to them, 30 Imedi reporters and cameramen were injured that day. Interspersed throughout the program were statements by Georgian officials publicly accusing Imedi of "escalating tensions." Later in the evening, Imedi ran a special talk show with Imedi staff and public figures talking about the closure and resumption of broadcast at the station. After the initial report their reporting was balanced.

¶3. (SBU) The head of the Imedi TV Information Service confirmed to the Embassy that the station will offer limited news programming for the next two months, with thirty minutes of news every three hours during the day and the one-hour Kronika at 8 p.m. Five days a week Imedi will run Ghia Eteri, a political talk show at 11 p.m. and Targamadze will host the weekly Droeba show on Sunday evenings.

¶4. (SBU) Surprisingly, Georgian media reaction to Imedi's reopening was muted. Having covered Imedi's shutdown extensively, the country's leading newspapers did not include articles or editorials on the topic of its reopening, with the exception of a front page

article in the (low circulation) English-language daily "Georgian Messenger" and an interview with Imedi TV's lawyer published in daily pro-reform Resonance. None of the Television news shows carried stories about Imedi.

WHAT DIRECTION WILL IMEDI TAKE NOW?

15. (SBU) According to Lewis Robertson, Imedi General Manager and CEO of News Corp Caucasus, Targamadze, Anchor and Director of Imedi TV Political Programs, and the news staff wanted to devote their first four hours on air to the events of November 7, but he insisted on a one-hour limit. But in recent newspaper and television interviews, Robertson has stressed that Imedi will not change its editorial policy. "We never did anything wrong a month ago. We never called to overthrow the government. We have video tapes of what was said and what was not said. If the government does something good, we will say that that is good, but if the government does something bad, we will say that that is bad." Targamadze will be on air less, but will remain the primary political editor, with the responsibility to determine editorial policy.

16. (SBU) It appears that News Corp may not technically have any ownership in Imedi, and that Badri Patarkatsishvili, a declared presidential candidate, remains the primary owner, but Robertson stressed that News Corp has a contract and power of attorney to manage the station, and that he would not allow Patarkatsishvili to direct the station.

17. (U) The campaign spokesman for the National Movement Davit Bakradze, the State Minister For Conflict Resolution who is on a leave of absence to serve as the campaign spokesman, made a public statement welcoming Imedi back on air, while noting its unclear ownership. He promised that Government officials "will continue cooperation with Imedi TV journalists".

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MEDIA MONITORING: MICHNIK ARRIVES, SETS UP SHOP

18. (SBU) Adam Michnik, the new media ombudsman for Georgia, arrived back in Tbilisi on December 12 and on December 13 held a press conference to announce he will begin monitoring five Georgian television stations during the election campaign to be able to report on media bias in their reporting. His group will monitor the television newscasts of Imedi, Rustavi 2, Mze, Public television, and Kavkasia. These are four of the five national stations, representing both pro-government and pro-opposition views, and a small anti-government station that broadcasts only in Tbilisi. They will also monitor the seven major newspapers in Georgia. He announced the formation of his media advisory council, consisting of seven prominent Georgian journalists and experts: journalists Lasha Tugushi, Zviad Koridze, and David Paichadze, think tank leaders Alexander Rondeli and Gia Nodia, and public figures Levan Khetaguri, Nato Murvanidze. Two of these experts are also members of the Media Council (see below).

THE GEORGIAN MEDIA COUNCIL

19. (SBU) The Georgian Media Council, established three years ago as a European initiative but inactive for years, has now resumed its functions. On November 28, the Media Council, together with NGO community representatives, developed 12 recommendations for media to ensure fair and objective coverage of presidential elections. The document was signed by its Chairman, Gigi Tevzadze, Rector of Chavchavadze State University; by journalists Paata Veshapidze, Ninia Kakabadze, Eka Kvesitadze, David Paichadze, as well as NGO directors Ghia Nodia, of the Caucasus Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development, and Levan Ramishvili, of the Liberty Institute. One of the recommendations calls for pre-election monitoring of the broadcast media. The first findings of the monitoring group are to be announced on Friday, Dec 14.

ONE MORE MONITOR TOO

¶10. (SBU) Also on December 13 OSCE and ODIHR announced they are setting up a media monitoring group to oversee the Georgian media during the election campaign. Rasto Kuzel, a Czech media analyst and NGO leader (Memo 98), and his staff of five have already begun their work.

¶11. (SBU) Comment. Thanks in large part to USG and EU efforts, Imedi is back on the air. Clearly all parties recognize the importance of the media in this election campaign and are doing what they can to monitor reporting. Right now it is not clear how the various parties will work together. End Comment.

TEFFT